

The House Church as a Preservation Challenge. Heritage Issues Raised by the Saint-Paul's Church of Westmalle (1965-1968) by Marc Dessauvage in the Archdiocese Mechlin-Brussels

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SUMMARY.

The topic of this contribution is the future of the 'house church', an innovative typology connected to the progressive atmosphere of Vatican II (1962-1965). It was modelled on the practise of the early Christians who met in domestic settings. A plea for such simple and small-scale parish churches instead of monumental ones was uttered by the progressive Benedictine monk, Frédéric Debuyst (°1922), whose writings form the basis for our analysis. We will discuss a mature design of architect Marc Dessauvage (1931-1981), a champion of this church type. His Saint-Paul's parish church in Westmalle near Antwerp perfectly meets the suggestions of Debuyst, and so forms an ideal case study for this heritage, which is endangered in Flanders due to low church attendance. Concerning post-war church types there is an acute lack of preservation criteria that would allow taking into account the particularities. We propose therefore to go beyond the usual single focus on the art and architecture historical value. The central question is: Can we preserve the (immaterial) ideals of hospitality and community building which constitute the innovative aspect of the house church? The issue is not so much its historic, aesthetic and religious values but its societal meaning for past, present and future users. The question becomes even more poignant if considered in the context of the directives of the Council of the European Union on the role of cultural heritage in enhancing social capital, its benefits and sustainability.

The architecture of the house church is not monumental but, rather on the contrary, turned inward and focused on providing an interior for the celebration of the faith. Its essence lies not in the exterior form but in the interior arrangement, organized to pull the assembly towards the liturgical poles. According to Debuyst, the embodiment of the sacred character is not in materials but in *actions*: words, gestures, sacrifice, a meal. They define the platform for the Eucharistic liturgy: word, sacrifice and sacrament. Not a theatre or an auditorium, the liturgical interior should be simply a place to celebrate the remembrance of Christ.

How then to deal with the fact that a house church owes its existence to this 'theology of the assembly' when the assembly ceases to exist? What are the options for reuse when the interior is more important than the exterior and it is materialized by sacred furnishings? Can we claim that the architectural value was rescued, after we emptied the interior? Instead of focusing on the unity of shelter and interior, which would clearly inhibit possibilities for reuse, we propose to go back to the essence of this church type. Taking a positive attitude we argue that, because the 'theology of the assembly' disclaims the value of objects outside of their liturgical use, it is pointless to keep the interior furnishing when the church community dissolves. That community was its only *raison d'être*. Therefore there could only be alienation between it and any other users. What then remains of the house church must arguably be considered an empty shell, autonomous yet open to serving another assembly, another society. Due to its sober character, the architectural shelter can almost always bear a new

interior design adapted to new needs. From this viewpoint the house church can be reused without objections and even with a certain naturalness.

Introduction

The progressive atmosphere surrounding Vatican II gave a boost to typological innovation in Roman Catholic church architecture. One popular new type was the so called 'house church'. Inspired by the early Christians who met in domestic settings, the house church paradigm became synonym with values such as simplicity, proximity, authenticity. In Belgium, the champion of this new church type was Marc Dessauvage (1931-1981). Enjoying the favour of several progressive clerics he received active support of the Archbishopric Mechlin-Brussels¹ and the Benedictine monk Frédéric Debuyst (°1922), who extensively commented on Dessauvage's work in his widespread magazine *Art d'Eglise* and outside². In it Debuyst testifies to an active search for spiritual and social renewal in the religious practice, involving clerics and laity alike. Today however many churches are becoming redundant and the question of their future use is a delicate topic. Whereas the most important historical church buildings are listed, this is not the case for (most of) the post-war (house) churches. The lack of monumentality and manifest sacral identity, and the often peripheral location pose a severe threat to this heritage.

Given the lack of preservation criteria which would allow to take into account and discuss the particularities of the house church, this paper proposes to go beyond the single focus on the art/architectural historical value. As will be argued, the heritage value of the house churches of the 1960s in particular lies not primarily in their material qualities but in their communal and liturgical significance as spaces for spiritual and social encounter. This shifts the focus away from the exterior appearance towards the spatial and atmospheric qualities of the interior, and the central question becomes: Can we preserve the (immaterial) ideals of hospitality and community building which constitute the innovative aspect of much post-war church architecture?

Simply a place of celebration

Within this specific context we wish to take a closer look at a mature design by Dessauvage, the Saint-Paul's Church of Westmalle, a village in the province of Antwerp belonging to the Archbishopric of Mechlin-Brussels. It is an example of a parish 'house' church representative of the ideals of its time and having all the qualities of the post-conciliar wish for sober churches³. For this reason it is an ideal case study to assess preservation criteria.

Fig 1.

In doing this we want to refer to the writings of Debuyst who in 1968 publishes a book on Christian celebration and the relation to contemporary church architecture⁴. Saint-Paul's complies very well with his theoretical and practical prescriptions. Debuyst's view goes back to the basic idea of *celebration* as the principle of liturgy⁵. He states that, because the remembrance (*anamnesis*) of Christ is its high point, the church-meeting is essentially a celebration. As a consequence the church building needs to meet the qualities of the phenomenon of a festive activity, including talking, dining and reminding of happy memories⁶. He also refers to features of modern residential architecture such as openness, daylighting, adaptability and simplicity. These qualities can help materialize the concept of hospitality for a small church built for about 200 to 300 people⁷.

Church architecture must as it were turn inward, provide an interior for the celebration of the faith. The spatial arrangement of the interior needs to pull the assembly towards the central liturgical poles: the altar, the celebrant's chair, the ambo and the tabernacle, conceived as mobile furnishings. Together they define the platform for the Eucharistic liturgy: word, sacrifice and sacrament. Reminding that the liturgical interior is not a theatre nor an auditorium, Debuyst proposes to arrange the assembly on three sides of the central area. He stresses to always keep in mind that the celebration is determined by living persons and not by objects⁸. The embodiment and expression of the sacred character are *actions*: words, gestures, sacrifice, a meal. Exercising the liturgy, a feast, is a communal action of the assembly with the priest in unity. He warns against theatricality and excessive decoration⁹.

Fig 2.

The plan of Saint-Paul's is a literal translation of this idea. It is characterized by three rectangular zones for the assembly, one of which is rotated relative to the orthogonal axes of the others. This generates the idea of three naves which still form a unity with the central zone of the altar. The back wall of each nave is disconnected from the roof by large tilted windows which open the church space to the treetops of the surrounding natural setting. The result is a loose arrangement of the community around the events in the center, which stresses the communal character of the interior. The daylighting creates an intimacy around the altar that is different from homely coziness¹⁰.

The importance Dessauvage attributes to daylight is clearly visible in his sketches. The design of the interior elements uses a restrained palette of colors and materials: brick, concrete, glass and wood. It is the backdrop for *humane openness*; nothing stands in the way of the essence that is being enacted and witnessed¹¹.

Fig 3.

Heritage and soci(et)al meaning

The small scale, simplicity and discrete character of the house church doesn't prevent us to consider it heritage¹². Without going into further detail we propose that the values of Saint-Paul's in the historic, aesthetic and religious contexts can be assessed positively. The problem we wish to address here is its societal meaning in relationship to the architectural language and to its users: in the past, present and future.

How to deal with the fact that a house church owes its existence to the 'theology of the assembly' when this assembly ceases to exist? What are the options for reuse when the interior is more important than the exterior and the interior is shaped by sacred furnishings? Can we claim that the architectural value was rescued after we emptied the interior¹³? These questions become even more poignant if we consider them in the context of the recent directives of the Council of the European Union on the role of cultural heritage in creating and enhancing social capital and the collective and economic benefits of heritage and its sustainability¹⁴.

The assessment of 20th-century church architecture has to be contextual if we want to understand it in all its aspects. Two assumptions are important here. First, the fact that heritage values are contingent and not objectively given. Second, that different values can be discerned by different stakeholders or expert observers¹⁵. In order to uncover these different values, one must map those concerned. For Catholic parish churches they are: parish members (the faithful), neighbours (local community), the diocese, art and architecture historians, policy makers, ...

Fig 4.

We have seen that in the case of Saint-Paul's, but actually in all house churches, the interior is more important than the exterior appearance. Nothing but the assembly of believers gives meaning to the church. In this sense the design of the interior is only the material outcome of and support for the assembly during the celebration. If the community dissolves we can follow three lines of thought to deal with the church building.

First, we can save the church including the interior because it was conceived as a whole and demand that shelter and furnishing are not separated. If we do this, we keep the original but reuse becomes impossible and preservation equals a slow death sentence. Second, we can empty the shell and allow a new use, with the negative feeling that the church loses its essence and reuse only means a pragmatic infill. The intended Architecture has disappeared. We propose a third and more positive approach towards reuse, starting from the essence of the house church. Because the 'theology of the assembly' disclaims the value of objects outside of their liturgical use, it is pointless to keep the interior furnishing when the church community dissolves. That community was its only *raison d'être*.

Therefore, there could only be alienation between it and 'foreign' users. What then remains of the house church must be considered an empty shell, autonomous and capable of serving another assembly, another society. Due to its restrained and inexplicit character, the architectural shelter of the

house church can almost always bear with ease a new interior design adapted to new needs. From this viewpoint it can be reused without objections of conscience and even with a certain naturalness.

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Captions:

Fig. 1. Marc Dessauvage, Saint-Paul Church, Westmalle, interior, <http://www.artway.eu/userfiles/8.JPG>

Fig. 2. Floor plan, Marc Dessauvage, Saint-Paul's Church, Westmalle, ©Archive KADOC

Fig. 3. Sketch by Marc Dessauvage, Saint-Paul's church, Westmalle ©Archive KADOC

Fig. 4. Interior, Marc Dessauvage, Saint-Paul's Church, Westmalle, interior, <http://www.artway.eu/userfiles/5.JPG>

¹ See more on this issue in Sterken, "A House for God or a Home for his People?", 387-425.

² Dessauvage also received guidance from the Jesuit father (until 1968) Geert Bekaert (°1928), who from the end of WWII on played an active role in progressive circles dealing with the renewal of church architecture and art and published extensively on the matter.

³ The merits of his sacred architecture were already recognized during the sixties, being often mentioned in professional journals as fine examples. In the periodical *Art d'Eglise* from 1963, "Kerkenbouw Vlaanderen" [Church Architecture in Flanders] and see also the book Bekaert, *In een of ander huis*.

⁴ Debuyst, *Modern Architecture and Christian Celebration*. This book shows his idea's in a crystallized form. Starting in the fifties Debuyst published on a regular basis on these topics. The most important articles on the topic are: Debuyst, "Church Architecture and Christian Celebration": 2-9.; Debuyst, "Architecture moderne et célébration chrétienne 1.": 81-95; Debuyst, "Architecture moderne et célébration chrétienne 2.": p. 136-142.; Debuyst, "Architecture moderne et célébration chrétienne 3.": 145-157.

⁵ This view gains still more validity if we consider the historical context of the idea of hospitality in the Benedictine congregation.

⁶ Debuyst, *Modern Architecture and Christian Celebration*: 9-19.

⁷ Idem: 30-41 and p. 54-55.

⁸ Idem: 55-67.

⁹ Idem: 20-29.

¹⁰ Leuven, Archive Marc Dessauvage: 17.06.1965.

¹¹ Leuven, Archive Marc Dessauvage: 21.06.1965.

¹² See more on this issue in Böröcz, "Can 'house churches' be seen as 'authentic monuments'?: 115-122.

¹³ See more on this issue in Böröcz, "How Intangible are 'House Churches'?: 34-39.

¹⁴ "Conclusions on cultural heritage as a strategic resource for a sustainable Europe"

¹⁵ Mason, "Assessing Values in Conservation Planning": 7-9.